Laos's Peripheral Centrality in Southeast Asia: Mobility, Labour and Regional Integration

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Abstract

Laos´s position at the centre of the Southeast Asian mainland has entailed peripherality to regional loci of power. Its geography of peripheral centrality has however resulted in Laos becoming a realm of contestation between powerful neighbours. The analysis traces the construction of Laos within a regional space from pre-colonial times to contemporary special economic zones. Laos has been produced through mobility, foreign actors´ attempts to reorient space to their sphere of influence, and transnational class relations incorporating Lao workers and peasants, Lao elites and foreign powers. These elements manifest within current special economic zone projects.

Key words: Laos, regional integration, mobility, labour, special economic zones.

Introduction

In the past two decades, the Lao government has emphasized turning Laos from a "land-locked" to a "land-linked" country. Laos is located at the centre of mainland Southeast Asia and has been historically isolated from maritime trade routes. The vision encapsulated by the "land-linked" phrase is thus of transforming Laos´s relative geographic isolation into a centre of connectivity for the region. Laos will act as the central integrative territory which brings together other countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), facilitating commerce between them.[1] The "land-locked" part of the phrase implies tropes of "Laos as a forgotten, lost, half-formed and remote land",[2] one which has historically experienced "political, territorial and military stagnation".[3] The move to a "land-linked" country can therefore be read as signifying a desire to

[1] Vatthana Pholsena and Ruth Banomyong, *Laos From Buffer State to Crossroads* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2006), 2-3.
[2] Jonathan Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 46.
[3] Vatthana Pholsena and Ruth Banomyong, *Laos From Buffer State to Crossroads*, 2.

emerge from the traditional and autarkic into the bustling modernity of Southeast Asian capitalism. The straightforward linearity of this discursive manoeuvre obscures however the long and diverse history of Laos´s integration with the region. Rather than viewing Laos as largely apart from the main sweep of continental Southeast Asian history, it appears to make more sense to highlight the multiple forms of integration Laos has experienced, and their continuities and ruptures. Identifying the long trajectory of Laos within the region will then provide a vantage point for understanding the current round of regional integration.

The aim here is threefold. The first is to disrupt a straightforward notion of peripheries and centres in Laos´s external relations and integration into the global capitalist system. Laos has been cast as the "edge of the world"[4] or a "colonial backwater".[5] This however downplays the importance it has had as a constitutive part of historical regional dynamics and neighbouring polities. This is not to flip its peripherality to an all-important determining role, and ascribe a significance that would be difficult to maintain. It is rather to highlight that Lao territories have often been an object of contest through the history of capitalist development, spatial integration and colonial expansion in Southeast Asia. A focus on Laos´s role thus sheds light on the historical geography of capitalist trajectories in the region. The second aim is to establish that efforts to orient Laos to a sphere of influence or particular spatial formation, such as colonial Indochina, have involved Lao actors pursuing their own aims and goals when engaging with external powers. This complicates any easy narrative of imposition of external power or dependency. The third aim relates closely to the second, to emphasize the agency of a particular category of Lao actor; the subaltern. Unlike the majority of Lao historiography which tends to emphasize the historical agency of elite Lao, I highlight the relevance of worker and peasant agency to Laos´s shifting orientations within the region. I situate this subaltern agency in relation to both Lao and

[4] Jonathan Rigg, "Land-locked Laos: Development Dilemmas at the Edge of the World," *Geopolitics and International Boundaries* 2, 1 (1997): 153-174.
[5] Geoffrey Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater* (Boulder; Oxford: Westview Press, 1990)

foreign elite actors. Two important and interrelated themes are thus opened up; class relations and mobility. The aim here is to establish "an analytical optic that thinks core-periphery relations and class relations as coeval and intermeshed forces in capitalist development".[6] Laos´s various forms of integration have been processed through class relations both internal to the territory and stretching beyond it, and these class relations in turn have often hinged upon the spatial mobility of the subaltern. Capture and flight of labour power has been a persistent theme. This is evident not only for ethnic Lao-Tai,[7] but also for ethnic minorities, Vietnamese, and latterly Chinese migrants who have crisscrossed Lao space. This historical perspective helps us better understand two key points of contemporary relevance: struggles over mobility of the subaltern partly determine the forms of integration and the winners and losers therein; and analysis of development in Laos must be undertaken by situating it firmly within its regional connections in order to be adequate in explanation.

Peripheries, Centres and the Labour in Between

Analysis in terms of centres, or cores, and peripheries has been an abiding perspective on capitalist development, but is rightly viewed as problematic. While taking into account that vast economic and political inequalities exist between territories, a binary model is too blunt for the analysis of complex connections. Frank famously asserted a core-periphery model for the structure of the global economy, established in the colonial era.[8] Frank thus rejects the linear model of modernization theory, which sees only internal limitations on a country´s capacity for development, to posit instead a stunted developmental pathway for the unfortunate peripheral countries, structurally determined by global trading relations with the core. He analyses the

[6] Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Passages from Marxism to Postcolonialism: A Comment on Vivek Chibber´s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*," *Critical Sociology* 43, 4-5 (2017): 559-571, p.560.
[7] "Lao-Tai" refers to the majority ethnic group in Laos, who are part of the broader Tai ethno-linguistic group, which also includes the Thai of Thailand.
[8] Andre Gunder Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review* 18, 4 (1966): 17-31; see also Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

"development of under-development" as enacted through a satellite model which reaches deep into peripheral countries, sucking surplus value to the metropolitan cores. The value of Frank´s contribution lies in directing attention to the global inequalities of power which impact societal development. Nevertheless, Brenner was to emphatically critique Frank´s perspective for eliding the centrality of class relations in production.[9] More sophisticated versions of structural core-periphery analysis however aimed to understand "the dialectic of internal and external factors and social relations which conditioned development".[10] Contemporary global development is still interpreted by some authors in terms of the core-periphery structures, with endogenous technological development in core countries essentially unconnected with broader international conditions and diffusing out from the core.[11]

Anievas and Nisancioglu have taken issue with such internalist thinking on the grounds that international conditions have shaped developmental trajectories of what have been deemed to be "core" countries, a perspective which provides a useful approach for the present argument. Anievas and Nisancioglu mobilize Trotsky´s concept of uneven and combined development to emphasize "the geopolitically interconnected and sociologically co-constitutive nature of [capitalism´s] emergence".[12] Unevenness refers to the differentiated level and conditions of development both within and between countries, and the attendant spatial differences, entailing that structural competitive pressures between societies create "the whip of external necessity" which influence development. "Social development is thus ineluctably

[9] Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review* I/104 (1977): 25-92.
[10] Andrew M. Fischer, "The End of Peripheries? On the Enduring Relevance of Structuralism for Understanding Contemporary Global Development," *Development and Change* 46, 4 (2015): 700-732, p.708.
[11] Andrew M. Fischer, "The End of Peripheries? On the Enduring Relevance of Structuralism for Understanding Contemporary Global Development"
[12] Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu, "What´s at Stake in the Transition Debate? Rethinking the Origins of Capitalism and the `Rise of the West´", *Millennium* 42, 1 (2013): 78-102, p.85.

multilinear, polycentric and co-constitutive by virtue of its interconnectedness".[13] Combination describes the determination of the internal relations of a given society by their relations with developmentally differentiated societies, but also the way that different developmental stages are amalgamated within societies, giving rise to social forms which weld together contemporary and more archaic elements to create "multilinear trajectories of development".[14] The concept of uneven and combined development thus allows us to specify the co-constitution and thus co-dependence of core and peripheral societies. It permits insight into the highly specific conjunctural integration of centre and periphery in determinate historical and geographical contexts, acting as an explanatory factor for outcomes. This allows us to go past simple diffusionist models or a model such as Frank´s in which development is essentially determined by the needs of a metropolitan centre.[15]

In uneven and combined development the central concept is mode of production. The work of Jairus Banaji offers a way to view modes of production in a complex and non-linear way which avoids reducing them to a form of labour exploitation.[16] This enables analysis of multiple forms of labour exploitation as contributing to the development of capitalism. Banaji criticizes Marxist theory which employs a method of "formal abstractionism" in which "modes of production" are "deducible, by a relation of virtual identity, from the given forms of exploitation of labour".[17] The mode of production is rather given by "the laws of motion" specific to a historical epoch, and which are found in the capitalist mode of production as "the production and accumulation of surplus-value, the revolutionization of the labour process, the production of relative surplus-value on the basis of a capitalistically constituted labour-process, the

[13] Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu, "What´s at Stake in the Transition Debate? Rethinking the Origins of Capitalism and the `Rise of the West´", 86.
[14] Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu, "What´s at Stake in the Transition Debate? Rethinking the Origins of Capitalism and the `Rise of the West´" 86.
[15] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 65.
[16] This follows the argument of Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Passages from Marxism to Postcolonialism: A Comment on Vivek Chibber´s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*".
[17] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History*, 53.

compulsion to increase the productivity of labour, etc.", that is from the "*economic rhythms*".[18] These economic rhythms may be manifested through various forms of labour subjection entailing that "the *deployment of labour is correlated with modes of production in complex ways*".[19] Federici similarly emphasizes the importance of the "accumulation of labour" in multiple forms in both colonized peripheral and core countries.[20] Historical and contemporary capitalism has thus been constituted by labour deployment which is not only based on "free" wage-labour or wage labour clearly identifiable as being in a wage labour relationship, but which also incorporates various forms that can be characterized as "bonded labour",[21] "unfree labour"[22] or "disguised wage labour".[23] Banaji´s approach thus allows us to identify the emergence of capitalism and the integration of peripheral territories into a capitalist system as a long-term historical process which is non-linear and non-stadial "in which different forms of labour control are fused together across transnational space in specific configurations at particular conjunctures".[24] Labour in peripheral countries is incorporated into a developing transnational nexus of capitalist relations in highly complex ways. The development of uneven and combined capitalism – and so centre-periphery relations - is manifested through varied labour and class relations specific to particular historical-geographical conjunctures, relations that are ineluctably local but also stretch beyond that locality. Attempts to integrate Laos into Southeast Asia over the past two centuries will illustrate these points.

Laos: Region and Mobility

[18] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History*, 60.
[19] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History*, 5.
[20] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
[21] Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, Ulrike Lindner, Oliver Tappe, and Michael Zeuske eds. *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th-21st Century)*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).
[22] Tom Brass, "Debating Capitalist Dynamics and Unfree Labour: A Missing Link?," *Journal of Development Studies* 50, 4 (2014): 570-582; cf. Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History*, 131-154.
[23] Barbara Harriss-White, "Labour and Petty Production," *Development and Change* 45, 5 (2014): 981-1000.
[24] Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Passages from Marxism to Postcolonialism: A Comment on Vivek Chibber´s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital,*" 568.

I suggest here that the key to understanding Laos´s trajectories of capitalist development is to focus on the ways it lies at the centre of the Southeast Asian landmass and political and economic actors around it have attempted to orientate it to their sphere of influence and so create a specific regional configuration. In the pre-colonial era, Siam dominated, while French colonialists subsequently attempted to establish a distinct Indochinese space. Recent regional integration projects represent a more polycentric configuration, in which Laos has become an arena for the contending interests of Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese capital and states. Integration has in turn depended on establishing specific sets of class relations which link the ruling classes of imperial or capitalist "centres" with local Lao elites and with local subaltern classes. Siamese nobility mobilized Lao slave and feudal *corvée* labour; French colonialists in cooperation with Lao lords raised *corvée* and imported Vietnamese wage labour; contemporary foreign investors have engaged Lao workers in class relations mediated through the Lao state. In Laos such class relations have been heavily conditioned by the subaltern classes´ mobility and ruling classes´ attempts to manipulate mobility to essentially capture and fix workers and peasants in place.[25] Indicated here is the importance Moulier-Boutang attributes to flight of labour - which I would expand to mobility more broadly – as an active driver of change, one in which "those who do not have power are not necessarily exterior to the determination of power; they manage to modify it profoundly."[26] This point can be usefully borne in mind in the following examination of Laos´s *longue durée* of capitalist integration. To be clear, the argument here is not that a capitalist mode of production has existed in Laos since the late 18th century nor that Laos was predominantly and uninterruptedly capitalist from when capitalist production was first demonstrably established, arguably under the French; the early socialist plan years of the Lao PDR, for instance, are clear evidence it was not. It is rather that

[25] For an argument on the capture of subaltern labour power more generally in Southeast Asia see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[26] Stany Grelet, "The Art of Flight: An Interview with Yann Moulier-Boutang," *Rethinking Marxism* 13, 3-4 (2001): 227-235, p.228.

capitalist social relations have incorporated Lao people and territory for a longer period of time than is often thought and that mobile, transnational class relations have been key for each of the periods of uneven and combined regional integration discussed. The history is one of rupture and unevenness, but also of continuities in mobility in the constitution of Laos´s territory. Molland points out that "sedentariness" is typical of portrayals of Laos but is correct to assert that it is historically more accurate to assess Laos as gaining form through "polycentric connections" of trading and population movements in the Upper Mekong region.[27] The centrality of mobile class relations in these "polycentric connections" is thus explored below.

Pre-colonial Integration with Siam

Control over the mobility and labour power of Lao populations was significant in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as the early Bangkok kings of Siam attempted to establish regional hegemony. The renewal of Siam, after the Burmese sacking of the old Siamese capital, Ayudhya, in 1767, was enacted through an emergent commercial capitalism centred on Bangkok, and concomitant military action to assert control over peripheral resources to supply that trade. "Political expansionism thus resulted directly from the rejuvenation of the economy after the sacking of Ayudhya".[28] Economic growth was driven by Chinese demand and trading networks, while at the beginning of the 19th century the expansion of British influence in Southeast Asia created additional trading possibilities.[29] The Siamese ruling class obtained from Laos and other peripheries highly-valued forest produce to provide the Chinese merchants increasingly established in Bangkok from the late 18th century.[30] The expansion of this trade spurred

[27] Sverre Molland, "Migration and Mobility in Laos," in *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, ed. Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 327-349, pp. 327-328.
[28] Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778-1828*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications), 37.
[29] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13, 101; Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 46.
[30] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 13; Suehiro Akira, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand 1855-1985*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1996), 17.

commodification of production and was linked to new productive ventures in the central region of Siam and the hinterland. From the 1820s onwards, tax farming concessions given to Chinese immigrant "primitive entrepreneurs" by the Siamese government promoted investment and production of the concession goods for local consumption and export.[31] Tax farmers "were able to expand their trade business by using the large profits accruing from this lucrative official business."[32] By the end of the 19th century, Chinese profits and Crown revenues from tax farming were being redeployed in the growing Bangkok urban economy and forming the basis of prominent business families as well as positioning the royals within the Thai capitalist class.[33] The issue of significance here is that the establishment in Siam of a specifically capitalist mode of production – following Banaji´s emphasis on the economic rhythms of surplus value production and accumulation – found its roots in the commercial and productive expansion of the Bangkok revival. The role of labour mobilization was key within this.

The incorporation of Lao labour into Siamese capitalist orbits was undertaken through such means as the resettlement and enslavement of war captives, and tattooing to indicate *corvée* labour obligations to the Siamese crown or nobility. Historically, low population densities in mainland Southeast Asia had led to polities´ competition over populations and their forced removal to another territory to satisfy labour demands.[34] The early Bangkok rulers implemented a vigorous programme of asserting control over labour, including improving the registration of *phrai* – free commoners who were required to submit labour services to feudal lords – and tattooing their wrists to enable identification and control.[35] Siam´s mobilization of labour within its territories was pivotal for providing the military manpower to effectively subjugate Laos and Cambodia into tributary status. Military campaigns asserted Siamese power and provided

[31] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 100.
[32] Suehiro Akira, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand 1855-1985*, 73.
[33] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 107.
[34] Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: Volume 1*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 132-135.
[35] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 12.

security for the Siamese state but were also accompanied by the forced transfer of Lao populations, as "there was work to be done in Siam, but not enough people to do it".[36] In 1779 when the Siamese defeated the Lao principality of Vientiane, thousands of Lao families were subsequently made to resettle in central Siam, and worked on the estates of the nobility there.[37] The supply in slave labour helped to boost the early accumulation of capital, contributing to a move away from petty production and into export commodities.[38] For example, new sugar cultivation methods used between the 1810s and 1860s were labour-intensive, with sugar workers "often procured through duress".[39] Chinese immigrant merchants initiated sugar processing from sugar cane around 1810. Immigrant Chinese labour was used in this industry but was apparently insufficient to meet the growing world demand for Siamese sugar exports, and forced migrants were employed in expanding the agricultural production to feed the sugar factories staffed by Chinese wage labour.[40] Lao war captives were resettled in villages in the vicinity of Bangkok, and these villages retained their slave status into the late 19th century, when, freed from their bonded obligations, they found waged employment in government public works, and Western and Chinese industrial enterprises.[41]

5000 Lao were raided from Vientiane in the 1780s to provide construction labour.[42] Slave labour was used in Siam for constructing canals, roads, and irrigation works for agriculture as well as other public works such as fortifications.[43] The forced mobility of Lao populations into Siamese territory thus also contributed to the infrastructural developments which facilitated the

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[36] Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration,* 46.
[37] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline*, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), 112.
[38] Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 45.
[39] Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 46.
[40] Puangthong R. Pawakapan, "Warfare and Depopulation of the Trans-Mekong Basin and the Revival of Siam´s Economy," *Southeast Asia Research Centre Working Paper Series*, no.15 (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, 2014), 17-18; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 188.
[41] Edward Van Roy, "Under Duress: Lao War Captives at Bangkok in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Siam Society* 97 (2009): 43-68.
[42] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 13.
[43] Andrew Turton, "Thai Institutions of Slavery," in *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, ed. James L. Watson, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 251-292.

mobility of goods and people throughout the kingdom, strengthening connections with developing transnational capitalist circuits.

Lao *corvée* labour services also contributed to the manpower required for economic expansion. Siamese administrations tattooed commoners on the wrist to register their status as *phrai*.[44] Early in the reign of Rama III (r.1824-1851) the Siamese administration conducted tattooing of Lao *meuang*[45] on the west bank of the Mekong to consolidate territorial and population control. The commoners of the Lao *meuang* had never before been subjected to this form of labour control. Lao *corvée* labour was raised in this period to construct public works for the new capital of Bangkok, including a fortress.[46] These labour demands "thus made on Lao peasants who had never previously had to perform such heavy, prolonged labour caused considerable dissatisfaction, and undoubtedly contributed to growing Lao resentment".[47] The recalcitrant position of the requisitioned Lao peasants here indicates an important role of the subaltern in causing events of historical significance.

The discontent caused by labour requisitions contributed to causing a Lao uprising in the 1820s which would ultimately end in defeat and the forcible transfer of a large part of the Lao population to Siamese territory. The lord of Vientiane, Chao Anouvong, for reasons of which the issue of control over Lao manpower was but one and which need not detain us here, launched a revolt against the Siamese suzerain in 1827. A priority for Anouvong was to regain control over all the Lao on the Khorat plateau[48] under Siamese rule in order to boost the population – and thus military and labour – resources available to him.[49] When the Siamese defeated the revolt

[44] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 8; B.J. Terwiel, "Tattooing in Thailand´s History," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 111, 2 (1979), 156-166.
[45] *Meuang* were the historical Tai polities, typically centred on a key population locus. The contemporary Thai and Lao word is used for both "city" and "country" (e.g. Thailand).
[46] Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 141-145; Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang*, 119.
[47] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang*, 119.
[48] Northeast Thailand.
[49] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang*, 119.

they sacked Vientiane, and "tens of thousands of families" were forcibly resettled in areas under firm Siamese control, with many relocated to the Chao Phraya Basin.[50] The assertion of Siamese control over the Lao territories brought them more directly into conflict with an expansionary Vietnam. The Vietnamese presented a challenge to control over the labour resources in the area of the Mekong.[51] The population on the Siamese-Vietnamese frontier also represented a security threat for Bangkok, as potential supporters of a Vietnamese invasion. Siam thus undertook measures to depopulate the east bank of the Mekong, combining tactics of force and persuasion. Depopulation efforts continued into the 1840s, with struggle over the mobility of populations evident: "Those resettled took any opportunity to return, despite continuing Siamese raids"; nevertheless, by 1847 "the east bank was a virtual wasteland of abandoned villages and rice fields".[52] The depopulation of the territory would impact on later French attempts to conjoin their new colony with Indochina, as detailed below.

Labour from Laos was also implicated in the development of the late 19th-century Siamese economy through economic migration for waged employment, foreshadowing the migration flows of the contemporary era. British companies extracted teak for export in the hills of what is now northern Thailand. Teak extraction necessitated a large labour force to live in the forests. Lowland Thai rice farmers were unwilling to do such work and large numbers of ethnic Khamu from Laos were hired for fixed wages for set periods of time. They were attracted through cash payments with which they could buy goods to take home to isolated home villages. Migrating for wage employment in Thailand however also became a means to avoid onerous French *corvée* and tax requirements.[53]

[50] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang*, 125.
[51] Puangthong R. Pawakapan, "Warfare and Depopulation of the Trans-Mekong Basin and the Revival of Siam´s Economy", 14.
[52] Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang*, 131.
[53] Kennon Breazeale, "Historical Population Movements in North and Northeast Thailand," *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 20, 2 (2012): 109-144.

Emergent Siamese capitalism gained impetus from Chinese trade and the challenge of British imperial influence but also from consolidation of control over peripheral labour and resources. Bonded *corvée*, slave labour and wage labour all came from the Lao territories to variously produce export commodities and create the necessary infrastructure for capitalist expansion. The development of capitalism within Lao territories themselves may have been lacking, but the uneven development between Siam and Laos was constituted via the at times highly adverse incorporation of Lao labour under multiple modes of deployment.

Labour, Mobility and Class Relations in French Laos

The expansion of French colonialism into Laos from an initial base in Cochinchina was motivated by both capitalist interests and inter-colonialist competition with Britain.[54] Laos was to play a small yet still important role in the French colonial project in Indochina, which was focused on Vietnam. The French were spurred to expand out of their Vietnamese base to on the one hand reinvigorate the French economy at the end of the 1870s, and on the other to halt any possible British expansion eastwards.[55] The French also initially had a view to use Laos as a staging ground for expansion into Siam west of the Mekong.[56] The French held Indochina to be a single entity composed of five parts; the Vietnamese territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, and also Laos and Cambodia. The colonists did not consider the Lao east bank territories to be a separate and coherent political entity but rather an extension of Vietnamese Indochina. It was a strategic hinterland which would consolidate the Vietnamese-centred Indochinese space geopolitically and through its natural resources economically.[57] Indochina

[54] Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 32-39.
[55] Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860*-1945, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 33.
[56] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.
[57] Martin Stuart-Fox, "The French in Laos, 1887-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, 1 (1995): 111-139.

was thus constituted through its Lao periphery, as Siam had constituted itself through control over its Lao margins earlier in the century.

Colonial policy in Laos was directed at ways it could serve the Vietnamese colonies. France however intended that the Lao colony pay for itself. The French initially had high hopes for Laos as a conduit to Chinese trade, but the Mekong could not provide a route to China.[58] Hopes of intra-Indochinese trade were also dampened when it became apparent that trade both in Laos and in the Khorat plateau was oriented towards Bangkok.[59] Efforts to promote economic development instead centred on repopulating Laos with a workforce and constructing a transport infrastructure. Establishing control over labour and thus restructuring class relations between a colonial French state, Indochinese elites and Lao and Vietnamese labour were central in these tasks.

Capitalist development in colonial Laos implied a spatial reconstruction which attempted to weld the territory to the Vietnamese colonies, as a provider of commodities extracted using French capital and as a vent for Vietnamese surplus labour.[60] Tin-mining was the main focus of capitalist investment in the Lao economy. Export-oriented rubber and coffee plantations also existed to a smaller extent. The *debloquement* – unblocking or opening up - and Laos´s integration into the wider Indochinese economic space assumed a key role in France´s *mise en valeur* of this hinterland. An emphasis on the construction of transport infrastructure was such that Gunn argues "the "development" of the country was almost coterminous with road construction".[61] Rail and road links were intended to reorient Laos away from its links with Siam. Three road routes were built to link the Lao Mekong towns with the Vietnamese coast

[58] Milton Osborne, *River Road to China: The Mekong Expedition, 1866-1873*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).
[59] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 46.
[60] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 29.
[61] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 26-28.

across the Say Phu Luang cordillera, crossing the range in Thakhaek, Savannakhet and Xieng Khouang provinces, although a planned railway never materialized.[62]

The French were faced with significant issues of labour mobilization in their attempts to integrate Laos into the circuits of the Indochinese and world economies. They attempted to solve this problem through two primary means: importing labour from Vietnam and requisitioning *corvée* labour from the indigenous population. Laos was beset by the issue of low population density, a legacy of the Siamese depopulation campaigns. Population was also reduced throughout the 19th century by slave raiding in the Lao highlands, stimulated by the labour demands of the Siamese economy.[63] Laos´s regional integration was once again to be defined by significant labour mobility, recursively determined by previous population movements.

In addition to a low population, in the French view the Lao were indolent and lacked the vigour needed for development. An important part of the solution was to import more energetic Vietnamese surplus labour, especially from Annam, to repopulate the colony.[64] Migration to Laos was spurred by the dynamics of changing land holdings and class formation in the Vietnamese countryside. Wealthy Vietnamese landholders emerged, collaborating with the French to gain control over land. Landless and land-poor households increased, forming a segment dependent on wage labour or tenant farming arrangements for subsistence.[65] Landlessness and tenancy-related indebtedness thus created pressures for poorer Vietnamese to seek work in the capitalist colonial economy in wider Indochina, including Laos.

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[62] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 47-50.
[63] Oliver Tappe, "Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," in *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th-21st Century)*, ed. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, Ulrike Lindner, Oliver Tappe, and Michael Zeuske (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 103-132, p.111.
[64] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 33.
[65] Oliver Tappe, "Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia", 116; Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 394-414.

Vietnamese performed varied tasks within the Lao economy, working as labourers, traders, and government officials.[66] The French encouraged immigration to the extent that the Vietnamese population numbered 40,000 in 1943 and formed majorities in the main Mekong valley towns.[67] Significant numbers – up to 6,000 – worked in the tin mines of central Laos. Gunn notes that Vietnamese migrant labour in Laos was "free" wage labour.[68] Mining in central Laos appeared to have a fluctuating workforce of seasonal migrant labour, with workers returning home in the dry season.[69] Conditions were reportedly terrible and the colonial state was implicated in coercion of mining labour once within the mining enterprise, indicating the confluence of colonial state and capitalist interests.[70] Vietnamese labour in Laos was also perhaps enmeshed in relations of bondage. The coolie system of indentured[71] labour has been described as "a crucial factor for French strategies of economic development".[72] Indentured and free wage labour were used side by side elsewhere in French Indochina,[73] especially on rubber plantations, which admittedly Laos largely lacked. It does however raise the possibility that indentured labour occurred in Laos.

The French also used local *corvée* labour in their attempts to weld Laos to the Indochinese space, with its use mediated through mobility and local class relations. Local labour was connected with mobility in two key senses. The first was that *corvée* was put to work on road construction, creating the very conditions for other forms of mobility. The second was that

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[66] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 35.
[67] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 47.
[68] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954): Vietnamese Communist Power and the Lao Struggle for National Independence*, (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1988), 31-32.
[69] Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 267.
[70] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954),* 31-32.
[71] "Indentured" here refers to the variant of bonded labour found in Indochina which involved workers signing three-year contracts binding them to the place of production under threat of legally-backed coercion. See Oliver Tappe, "Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia" 112 and Martin J. Murray, "´White Gold´ or ´White Blood´?: The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina, 1910-1940," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, 3-4 (1992): 41-67.
[72] Oliver Tappe, "Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia" 114.
[73] Martin J. Murray, "´White Gold´ or ´White Blood´?," 52.

the French faced issues with retaining their workforce as *corvée* workers resisted through mobility. French efforts to impose taxation on the population were enacted through local Lao elites, changing in various ways the traditional hierarchical relationships and leading to outcomes such as increased mobility and rebellions.

The mobilization of Lao *corvée* workers was interwoven with the taxation system. The Lao had to contribute both tax in cash form and *prestations* (labour dues). Ethnic Lao-Tai males aged 19-60 were to pay two piastres a year – compelling participation in the cash economy by for instance selling crops or engaging in wage labour – and were also obligated to perform an annual twenty days of *corvée,* five of which were performed in the taxpayer´s place of origin. The required rates for the upland ethnic minorities were set at one piaster and ten days of *corvée*. *Prestations* were imposed during the less busy period after the harvest season had ended. Labourers were put to work on road construction and other public works. As with the Siamese deployment of Lao war captives for infrastructure construction, it is notable how unfree labour was implicated in the capitalist trajectories of regional integration. In both cases of construction requisitioned labour was used not in the direct services of capitalist production but in creating a key condition for market integration and commodity circulation. State-sponsored *corvée* also benefited merchant capital in various ways, with trading outposts serviced by unremunerated labour requisitions.[74]

The imposition of *corvée* did not run smoothly and met with various forms of resistance. The ethnic Lao-Tai population evidenced highly mobile rejection of labour obligations. According to one report of 1930, between 600 and 800 families in the Luang Prabang districts fled to Siam to avoid *corvée*, protesting at both the forced mode of requisition and conditions in the work sites.[75] Members of the Brao ethnic group moved back and forth across the border between

[74] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 48-49.
[75] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 89.

southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia to evade tax and *corvée* obligations.[76] 1935 saw the mass desertion of three successive shifts of *corvée* labourers from a public works on the RC13 highway. Lao-Tai and ethnic minority labourers in Champassak, southern Laos "were notorious for late arrival, low productivity, desertions and "arrogance" towards the *cai* [labour supervisor]".[77] As noted above, Khamu from northern Laos were motivated by local *corvée* to migrate to wage employment in northern Thailand. Mobility was thus an important form of subaltern agency, representing a form of power; the act or threat of flight could improve conditions of life.

Local Lao nobility, the *chao meuang*, had responsibility for collecting taxation and deployment of *corvée* in their areas, as the French had organized their administration to govern through the existing social structure.[78] In southern Laos local nobility collected the French taxes while also demanding traditional taxes and labour levies. The tax burden was thus increased, imposing "a considerable and often excessive burden on the poorest levels of society".[79] Local differentiation occurred however. In Houaphan, a province then divided between Vietnamese and Lao colonial administrations, the stricter combined colonial-feudal requisitions on the Vietnamese side caused many peasants to migrate to the Lao side, where local lords had calculated the population in a way that allowed them to implement colonial taxes and also take their traditional dues without imposing too onerous a burden. The Vietnamese administration demanded the return of their taxable population indicating the struggles over a mobile population and also over the integration of territory. The migrations were used by French colonial administrators as an argument for integrating the Houaphan *meuang* as a single Lao province, achieved in 1903.[80] Baird argues that around the turn of the 20th century and in its

[76] Ian G. Baird, "Making Spaces: The Ethnic Brao People and the International Border between Laos and Cambodia," *Geoforum* 41 (2010): 271-281.
[77] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 90.
[78] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 49-50.
[79] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, 32.
[80] Oliver Tappe, "A Frontier in the Frontier: Sociopolitical Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese Borderlands," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16, 4 (2015): 368-387.

first decade the revolts launched by Lao upland minorities in southern Laos were motivated in part by Siamese and then French colonial disruption of tributary relations with the royal house of Champassak, and that furthermore members of the royal house clandestinely participated in these revolts.[81]

The French spurred by the external necessity of British competition and need to consolidate their Indochinese possessions expanded into Laos and attempted to weld it to the more well-developed Vietnamese space to further colonial capitalism. Control over labour was crucial in this endeavour, and the methods deployed resonates with Banaji´s arguments on the complexity of the articulation of labour deployment with the development of a capitalist mode of production. Free wage labour, forced state *corvée*s, and possibly indentured labour were implicated in the French *mise en valeur*. A focus on labour here illustrates how outcomes were determined by internal events and processes as well as imposing external forces. The complex arrary of labour mobilities evident across, and crossing, the Lao territories both reflected and constituted class relations structured by the colonial state. Tracing these movements evidences how Laos was connected to and constitutive of development processes elsewhere in the Southeast Asian peninsula, a theme which reoccurs in more recent times.

Capitalist Development and Lao Mobilities in the Era of ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion

The 1980s saw Laos embark on a capitalist development pathway after an interregnum of some ten years attempting a socialist course. Participation in regional development frameworks such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) increased from the end of the 1990s. Mobilities of the subaltern have interacted in complex ways with the advance of capitalist development and regional integration,

[81] Ian G. Baird, "Millenarian Movements in Southern Laos and North Eastern Siam (Thailand) at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Reconsidering the Involvement of the Champassak Royal House," *Southeast Asia Research* 21, 2 (2013): 257-279.

combining tendencies from the previous two epochs of capitalist development discussed above. As in the pre-colonial period, Laos is the source of significant labour migration to Thailand, albeit in a typically more voluntary manner. Similar to the French colonial era Laos is also the destination for labour migration. Contemporary migration flows come from Vietnam, China and also Myanmar. Furthermore, upland ethnic minorities have been drawn more closely into the development and geographical mainstream by their often involuntary resettlement and sedentarization. The mobilities of workers and peasants have become a target of concern and intervention for Lao ruling elites, as they were for the French, as the need to fix a population in place for market-oriented production and exchange has gained increasing importance amid the possibility that mobility will deprive Laos of the workforce necessary for constituting capitalism on its territory.

Independence for Laos in 1953 initiated a tumultuous 22 year period defined by the second Indochina war and a Cold War contest over Laos´s international integration, and resulting in Communist revolution in 1975. A firm political relationship with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established during the war years, but nevertheless the newly minted Lao People´s Democratic Republic was affected by two key flows of people west across the Mekong to Thailand. Thousands of Lao refugees left the country in the years immediately after the revolution, initially largely comprised of those who had served under the defeated Royal Lao Government, such as civil servants and members of the royal army.[82] The Lao government launched a programme of agricultural collectivization in 1978. Many Lao peasants, dissatisfied with the reorganization of traditional work patterns, fled across the Mekong. Peasant resistance to collectivization, expressed both *in situ* and through flight to Thailand, undermined the programme to such an extent that the government suspended it in 1979.[83] The agency of

[82] MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 197.
[83] Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism and Post-Socialism*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1995).

subaltern Lao was here again of significance in influencing changes in the political economy of Laos´s regional integration, contributing to an eventual turn to an externally focused orientation.

The swift abandonment of collectivization is indicative of Laos´s short engagement with a socialist planned economy and quick realignment with a capitalist development pathway. In 1986, after years of economic difficulty, the Lao PDR government embarked on a course of market-oriented liberalization. A key strategy was attracting foreign investors, with a raft of investment-promoting reforms enacted.[84] Foreign investment subsequently increased,[85] picking up especially in the 2000s.[86] The major sources of investment have been Laos´s immediate neighbours of China, Thailand and Vietnam. Laos´s neighbours vie for economic advantage and geopolitical influence, manifesting as investment and aid flows. Laos can thus be seen as a frontier space acting as an expanded arena for the "spatial fixes" of surplus capital from its neighbouring countries. For instance, a key motivation of China´s engagement with the Greater Mekong Subregion has been the "go out" policy to internationalize regional Chinese capital.[87] Increases in Vietnamese investment can be seen as part of an intentional Vietnamese state strategy to boost Vietnamese capital.[88] Thai investments have concentrated in the energy sector, with hydropower providing an outlet for Thai capital as well as a benefit in terms of energy supply to power the Thai economy.[89] This foreign investment has been accompanied and facilitated by Laos´s participation in regional integration frameworks.

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[84] Ronald Bruce St John, *Revolution, Reform and Regionalism in Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, (London; New York: Routledge), 113-114.
[85] Nick Freeman, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Direct Investment in Laos, 1988-2000," *Post-Communist Economies* 13, 1 (2001): 101-119.
[86] Kenta Goto, "Implication for Laos´ Development of Its Increasing Regional Integration and Chinese Influence," *Asian-Pacific Economic Literature* 25, 2 (2011): 68-88.
[87] Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Kanishka Jayasuriya, "Internationalisation of the Chinese Subnational State and Capital: The Case of Yunnan and the Greater Mekong Subregion," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69, 2 (2015): 185-204.
[88] Martin Stuart-Fox, "Laos: The Chinese Connection," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2009): 141-169; Miles Kenney-Lazar, "Plantation Rubber, Land Grabbing and Social-Property Transformation in Southern Laos," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, 3-4 (2012): 1017-1037.
[89] Kenta Goto, "Implication for Laos´ Development of Its Increasing Regional Integration and Chinese Influence", 78.

In a manner reminiscent of the French *débloquement* the Lao government views the economic transformation of the country as hinging upon achieving a form of regional integration. The current round of regional construction differs in that Laos is integrating with its neighbours on all sides. The government´s discourse of turning Laos from a "land-locked to land-linked" country signals this intention. Laos officially acceded to ASEAN in 1997, motivated largely by an economic interest in gaining access to trade, investment and development aid.[90] Laos has also participated in the Asian Development Bank-backed Greater Mekong Subregion project since its inception in 1992. The GMS, an integration and cooperation framework rather than an organization, is based on the idea of a growth triangle; cooperation between neighbouring countries at uneven levels of development to not only bolster trade between them but also to combine complementary investment and cheap labour in order to boost exports to outside the growth triangle.[91] A primary aim of the GMS has been to construct "economic corridors", complexes of transport and communications infrastructure which traverse the Southeast Asian mainland. Laos is crossed by two of the main corridors, the North South Economic Corridor and the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC).[92]

Thailand emerged as a popular destination for Lao labour migration as the Thai economy expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s and began to experience labour shortages for its low-skill industries.[93] Lao migrants in Thailand largely work as domestic workers, in agriculture, selling food, construction, and light manufacturing. Contemporary Lao labour, as during the pre-colonial era, has been incorporated into the Thai economy in both free and unfree ways, with

[90] Vatthana Pholsena and Ruth Banomyong, *Laos From Buffer State to Crossroads*, 28-38.
[91] Paul Cammack, "World Market Regionalism at the Asian Development Bank," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46, 2 (2016): 173-197.
[92] Christian Taillard, "The Continental Grid of Economic Corridors in the Greater Mekong Subregion Towards International Integration," in *Transnational Dynamics in Southeast Asia: The Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits Economic Corridors*, ed. Natalie Fau, Sirivanh Khonthapane and Christian Taillard (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), 23-52.
[93] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 217.

trafficking leading to bonded and forced labour.[94] It is however clearly not the mass enslavement of that period, with workers´ voluntary migration instead capable of turning into unfree conditions.[95] Exact numbers of Lao migrants in Thailand are hard to ascertain but estimates put their number at 306,624 in 2013, rising from 293,519 in 2011.[96] The majority go through unofficial channels. If numbers have increased in recent years, causes are likely complex with demographic changes increasing working age population, pressures on land and livelihoods, development of transport infrastructure, and a desire for Thai modernity all implicated.[97] Rigg warns against economic functionalist explanations of migration,[98] although there is evidence of migration being spurred by changes in access to land resources due to development projects such as hydropower dams.[99] Migrants also remain attracted to higher Thai wages and view remittances as a key source of income for their families.[100] It is thus possible to note that while the causes of Lao migration to Thailand are complex, the unequal consequences of Laos´s political economy and regional uneven development are important factors. It is noteworthy for the perspective developed here that Thailand´s economic trajectory has in a sense become dependent on mobilizing labour from its peripheries, including Laos. Thailand has struggled to emerge from a low-productivity, low- wage and labour-intensive model of accumulation.[101]

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[94] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Trafficking in Persons from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar to Thailand*, (Bangkok: UNODC, 2017), 81-83; *Radio Free Asia*, "Lao Migrants to be Witnesses in Human Trafficking Case," 28 August (2015).

[95] Sverre Molland, "Migration and Mobility in Laos," 333-334.

[96] Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, *Lao Labor Migration and Remittance*, (Vientiane: SADC Lao Program, 2014), 7-8.

[97] World Bank, *Lao Development Report 2014: Expanding Productive Employment for Broad-Based Growth*. (Washington DC: World Bank Group, 2014); Tanaradee Khumya and Kyoko Kusakabe, "Road Development and Changes in Livelihood and Mobility in Savannakhet, Lao PDR," *Development in Practice* 25, 7 (2015): 1011-1024.

[98] Jonathan Rigg, "Moving Lives: Migration and Livelihoods in the Lao PDR," *Population, Place and Space* 13, 3 (2007): 163-178.

[99] Keith Barney, "Land, Livelihoods and Remittances: A Political Ecology of Youth Out-Migration across the Lao-Thai Mekong Border," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, 1 (2012): 57-83.

[100] International Organization for Migration, *Assessing Potential Changes in the Migration Patterns of Laotian Migrants and their Impacts on Thailand and Lao People´s Democratic Republic*, (Bangkok: International Organization for Migration, 2016).

[101] Alain Mounier and Voravidh Charoenloet, "New Challenges for Thailand: Labour and Growth after the Crisis," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 40, 1 (2010): 123-143.

Spatial relocation of industries such as garments to access cheaper migrant labour has substituted for value chain upgrading,[102] and industries have been sustained by informalized, precarious work conditions, including those of migrants.[103]

Migrant Lao labour has helped to sustain a developmental pathway in Thailand which does not reflect a linear modernization trajectory, but equally complicates Laos´s own attempts to industrialize. The largely foreign-invested garments industry is the most notable labour-intensive manufacturing sector, centred on Vientiane but also with production in Savannakhet, and in existence since the 1990s. With high worker turnover and a tight labour market due to out-migration, firm managers have identified labour supply as one of the main constraints on their businesses.[104] This situation was exacerbated in 2012 with a minimum wage increase in Thailand making migration even more attractive, with labour mobility apparently a contributory factor to a fall in the value of garments exports from US$ 219 million in 2011 to US$ 174 million in 2015.[105] Factory owners appear to be in something of an invidious position as while suffering labour shortages, the government´s proposed solution of increasing the minimum wage to fix workers in Laos or attract them back has been met with scepticism from factory owners also concerned about profit margins.[106] In this context labour mobilization and securing it in place for production assume great significance.

It is thus important to note the ways that migrants internal to Laos are incorporated into the regional dynamics via foreign investment projects. While many workers are integrated through typical wage labour arrangements, there is also evidence of multiple forms of labour

[102] Kenta Goto and Tamaki Endo, "Upgrading, Relocating, Informalising? Local Strategies in the Era of Globalisation: The Thai Garment Industry," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, 1 (2014): 1-18.
[103] Kevin Hewison and Woradul Tularak, "Thailand and Precarious Work: An Assessment," *American Behavioural Scientist* 57, 4 (2013): 444-467.
[104] World Bank, *Lao PDR, Labour Standards and Productivity in the Garments Export Sector Sector: A Survey of Workers and Managers*, (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2012).
[105] Vanthana Nolintha, "Tough Times in the Laos Garment Industry," *East Asia Forum*, 3 June (2016).
[106] *Radio Free Asia*, "Lao Factory Owners Say Proposed Wage Hike Will Shutter Businesses," 9 February (2018).

extraction, as well as the blurring of the boundaries of "free" and "unfree" labour.[107] In Bokeo province, northwest Laos, Chinese-invested banana plantations have used migrant workers from other provinces as the main crop tenders. Rather than wage labour, they are contracted to be paid by a lump sum determined by the weight of bananas harvested from their allocated plot at the end of the 7-10 month-long season. Other tasks on the plantations are performed by non-contracted, largely local day labour working on piece rates. Although migrants are reported as willingly returning for multiple seasons, the contracting method has the practical effect of binding them to the plantation for the whole season as they would not receive a final payment if they left before it ended. Furthermore, legal access to labour rights was apparently obscured by the Chinese companies casting the relationship as one of contract farming, despite contracts stipulating Chinese supervision of the labour process.[108] On coffee plantations in southern Laos, workers have reported receiving partial payments in order to dissuade them from leaving.[109] Recruitment drives in northern villages for Vientiane garments factories also complicate the notion of Lao labour´s "free" incorporation into contemporary regional production. Village heads have reportedly received per head incentives from factory recruiters to provide them with workers, raising the possibility that young women migrate to garment work under pressure from powerful community personages.[110]

Laos's integration into the wider regional space has not only been secured through migration to Thailand, but also through acting as a vent for neighbouring country surplus labour. In-migration also helps to addresses the quandary of labour mobilization in Laos. Foreign

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[107] Genevieve LeBaron, "Unfree Labour Beyond Binaries," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, 1 (2015): 1-19.
[108] Stuart Ling and Mai Yer Xiong, *Labour Rights, Child Rights and Gender Justice for Lao Workers in Chinese Banana Plantations in Bokeo*, (Vientiane: Plan International/CAMKID, 2017), 7-10, 29.
[109] R. Molina, *Camps, Children, Chemicals, Contractors and Credit: Field Observations of Labour Practices in Plantations and Other Social Developments in Savannakhet and Champasak*, (Pakse: GAPE/JVC, 2011), 18.
[110] CARE, *Sewing the Line: A Qualitative Baseline Analysis of the Risks and Opportunities Posed for Young Women by Migration from Rural Laos to Vientiane for the Purpose of Employment in the Garment Manufacturing Industry*, (Vientiane: CARE, 2012), 8,

investment from China, Vietnam and Thailand has often been accompanied by migrant labour, with workers from these countries reported as building projects such as hydropower dams, and working in mines and on plantations.[111] Burmese migration has also occurred.[112] Again much of this labour comes through unofficial channels, with some 200,000 undocumented foreign workers in Laos in 2012 according to local media.[113] As Molland notes "Vietnamese and Chinese migration are intimately intertwined with a broader politics of infrastructure development (such as road construction), but also land concessions, agribusiness, and…special economic zones".[114]

Chinese migration has been most significant in border provinces in northern Laos. Estimates from 2010 put the number of Chinese migrants in Laos at 80,000.[115] Chinese workers began arriving in the 1990s as part of road construction projects and cooperation between Yunnan province and northern Lao provinces. Some of these migrants stayed at the end of their contracts to engage in petty trade and business opportunities.[116] Most notable recently has been the influx of Chinese labour to construct the controversial high-speed railway linking China with Vientiane.[117]

Vietnamese workers have been reported as working on construction projects in urban areas and on plantations,[118] and migrating to establish petty businesses.[119] Vietnamese migrant

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[111] *Radio Free Asia*, "Laos Moves to Regulate Undocumented Foreign Workers" 6 November (2013).
[112] Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Commodifying Sovereignty: Special Economic Zone and the Neoliberalization of the Lao Frontier," *Journal of Lao Studies* 5, 1 (2014): 29-56.
[113] *Vientiane Times*, "Govt to Legalize Undocumented Foreign Workers," 26 March cited in Karen McAllister, "Rubber, Rights and Resistance: The Evolution of Local Struggles Against a Chinese Rubber Concession in Northern Laos," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, 3-4 (2015): 817-837, p.826.
[114] Sverre Molland, "Migration and Mobility in Laos," in *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, 343-344.
[115] Asian Development Bank, *Facilitating Safe Labour Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion; Issues, Challenges, and Forward-Looking Interventions,* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2013), 3.
[116] Danielle Tan, "Small is Beautiful: Lessons from Laos for the Study of Chinese Overseas," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41, 2 (2012): 61-94.
[117] *Nikkei Asian Review*, "Laos Merely a Bystander as China Pushes Belt and Road Ambitions," 6 October (2017).
[118] *Radio Free Asia*, "Laos Moves to Regulate Undocumented Foreign Workers"
[119] Duong Bich Hanh, "Temporary Lives, Eternal Dreams: Experiences of Viet Labour Migrants in Savannakhet, Laos," in *Ethnicity, Borders and the Grassroots Interface with the State: Studies on Southeast Asia in Honor of Charles F. Keyes*, ed. John A. Marston, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2014): 191-213.

numbers have been estimated at 20,000[120] although exact figures are hard to ascertain within a fluid context of short-term and longer-term migration and ease of crossing the border.[121] The colonial view of Vietnamese workers as more industrious is mirrored in current day migratory flows. Vietnamese rubber companies have been reported preferring to import their compatriots for plantation work as they believe that Vietnamese work harder for lower wages.[122] Cases have been reported of rubber tapping wages dropping in 2013-2014 on Vietnamese-invested plantations leading to Lao citizens stopping tapping and seeking wage labour elsewhere, including migrating to Thailand. The plantation investors turned to importing Vietnamese labour to replace them.[123] Thus within a single investment sector is contained multiple strands of Laos´s regional interconnectedness, composed by both mobile labour and capital.

Special Economic Zones

The intersections of labour mobility, regional integration and the spatial fixes of capital are crystallized in the development of special economic zones in Laos. As sites of foreign investment and labour migration which are often placed in border locations to boost connectivity with neighbouring countries, they offer a privileged lens for interpreting regional integration. Special economic zones can be interpreted as a territorialization project of the Lao state which provides the liberalized conditions for foreign investment and capital accumulation.[124] Zones have also been implicated in a range of state tactics and strategies which fix in place population, making people on the one hand legible for state control and on the other

[120] Asian Development Bank, *Facilitating Safe Labour Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion; Issues, Challenges, and Forward-Looking Interventions,* 3
[121] Duong Bich Hanh, "Temporary Lives, Eternal Dreams: Experiences of Viet Labour Migrants in Savannakhet, Laos", 202.
[122] Ian G. Baird, "Turning Land into Capital, Turning People into Labour: Primitive Accumulation and the Arrival of Large-Scale Economic Land Concessions in the Lao People´s Democratic Republic," *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 5, 1 (2011): 10-26, p.21.
[123] Ian G. Baird and Jefferson Fox, "How Land Concessions Affect Places Elsewhere: Telecoupling, Political Ecology, and Large-Scale Plantations in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia," *Land* 4, 2 (2015): 436-453, p.444.
[124] Guillaume Lestrelin, Jean-Christophe Castella and Jeremy Bourgoin, "Territorialising Sustainable Development: The Politics of Land-Use Planning in Laos," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, 4 (2012): 581-602.

integrating them into transnational circuits of capital accumulation. However, the mobility of subaltern workers has been shown to both enable and also disrupt the development strategies of capital and state.

The most notable Lao special economic zones have been the Golden Triangle zone in Bokeo province, the Savan-Seno zone in Savannakhet, and the Boten Golden City zone in Luang Namtha. The following analysis focuses on the first two of these to highlight contrasting intersections of regional integration and labour mobility.[125] The Golden Triangle zone is located across the border from Thailand in the eponymous tri-border area of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. The Lao government granted a concession to Kings Roman, a Chinese company, in 2007. The Lao government reports the size of the concession as 3000 hectares, although company documents are reported to state that it is 103 km².[126] The zone is focused on casino-based tourism, attracting customers from Thailand and China. The zone both depends on labour mobility and has itself been utilized as a tactic to limit mobility. Two thirds of the Golden Triangle SEZ consists of hills which will not be developed, instead being turned into a nature reserve where swidden agriculture is forbidden.[127] This evidences a state tactic used elsewhere in Laos of sedentarization of mobile upland populations through land concessions, converting shifting cultivation to permanent agriculture.[128] The resettlement and sedentarization of upland minority populations has been a key state policy to commercialize agriculture and enable service

[125] Boten Golden City was run by a Hong Kong-registered company and opened for business in 2007, operating as a casino tourism-based Chinese enclave on the Laos-China border. After becoming notorious for criminality the casinos, and in effect the zone, were closed down by 2011. It was reopened as Boten Beautiful Land Specific Economic Zone under a new Chinese investor and operates instead as a cross-border trade and logistics zone with no casinos.
[126] Government of Lao PDR, *Where to Invest: Special Economic Zone (SEZ)*, available at http://www.investlaos.gov.la/index.php/where-to-invest/special-economic-zone. Accessed 31 January 2018; Pál Nyíri, "Enclaves of Improvement: Sovereignty and Developmentalism in the Special Zones of the China-Lao Borderlands," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, 3 (2012): 533-562, p.539.
[127] Pál Nyíri, "Enclaves of Improvement: Sovereignty and Developmentalism in the Special Zones of the China-Lao Borderlands", 541.
[128] Michael B. Dwyer, "Building the Politics Machine: Tools for ´Resolving´ the Global Land Grab," *Development and Change* 44, 2 (2013): 309-333, p.318.

delivery, as well as curtail perceived security threats.[129] To develop the Golden Triangle zone local Lao people were moved off their land to make way, and received what they deemed to be inadequate compensation, including less available farm land. Job opportunities at the zone were limited, with for example only young people willing to work long hours at the casino accepted. The zone administration facilitated the movement of different groups into the zone. Chinese migrants moved in to run businesses such as hotels and restaurants. Migration networks, often associated with the home province of the site developer, enabled their access to the zone and the opportunities it presented. In addition, "the key engine that drives the economic force of the SEZ is the Burmese", migrant workers from Myanmar who constituted a large portion of the workforce in 2012.[130] Burmese migrants formed an informal, exploited and disposable workforce which was more pliable than a local Lao population somewhat resistant to the incursion of the zone into their livelihoods.[131] The zone has depended on capital and state´s differential management of the mobility of populations. The Golden Triangle thus has comprised a reterritorialization which has integrated Laos into the region. This reterritorialization has been implemented by powerful actors, to take advantage of uneven development and the possibilities for foreign capital that this presented. The reterritorialization has gained cohesion through the differential promotion of certain flows (capital, Chinese and Burmese migrants) and forms of social reproduction (zone wage labour over agricultural production).

The mobile configuration of SEZs in Laos and peripheral centrality in the reconfiguration of Southeast Asian production is also evident in the Savan-Seno SEZ in the southern province of Savannakhet. The Savan-Seno SEZ is located on the border with Thailand and also along the

[129] Ian G. Baird and Bruce Shoemaker, "Unsettling Experiences: Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in Laos," *Development and Change*, 38, 5 (2007): 865-888.
[130] Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Commodifying Sovereignty: Special Economic Zone and the Neoliberalization of the Lao Frontier", 49-50.
[131] Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Commodifying Sovereignty: Special Economic Zone and the Neoliberalization of the Lao Frontier", 48-58.

EWEC. The zone was formally established in 2003 but its first factory did not open until 2011. It underwent a period of expansion over 2013-2014 when at least five new factories opened up. These factories were parts of the global supply chains of multinational firms, most of whom had existing production networks in Thailand. At the time of the author´s fieldwork in 2013-2014, the Savan-Seno factories served as an export platform, where materials and parts are imported from the production network in Thailand, taking advantage of the zone´s tariff waivers, assembled into components of goods such as cameras and cars, and then re-exported for final product manufacture in Thailand, or in one case potentially in Vietnam. Companies are thus able to cut costs on cheaper Lao labour and the zone´s tax exemptions, while benefiting from proximity to Thailand and its production networks.[132] Mobile capital thus sought to enact a spatial fix which took advantage of the uneven development between Laos and its neighbours.

A look at the formation of the labour force indicates the deep connections between the regional Thai centre and its Lao periphery. Recruitment for an expanding zone was hindered by the high levels of labour migration from the province to Thailand. Official provincial statistics state that 35,607 migrants worked abroad in 2013,[133] although other estimates put the figure much higher at 75,000.[134] Either figure represents a significant proportion of a provincial labour market of around 500,000. Migration occurred at a higher rate from the more densely populated west of the province. The construction of infrastructure associated with the EWEC such as the Second Mekong International Bridge joining Savannakhet and Thailand, has facilitated migration.[135] Migration networks have formed between western Savannakhet and the Bangkok Metropolitan Region with Lao going to work in construction, agriculture, manufacturing,

[132] Zone site and factory managers interviews 10 January 2014, 13 January 2014, 27 February 2014, 16 May 2014; *Bangkok Post*, "Opportunity Next Door," 23 September (2013).
[133] Savannakhet Provincial Administration, *Aggregated Lao Labour Working Abroad* (2013), unpublished data.
[134] Factory manager interview 10 June 2014.
[135] Tanaradee Khumya and Kyoko Kusakabe, "Road Development and Changes in Livelihood and Mobility in Savannakhet, Lao PDR"

services and domestic work.[136] Migration was often undocumented and clandestine, and it operated as a form of "geography from below"[137] in distinction to formal state-led integration projects. Migration to Thailand would also alter local class relations in the Savan-Seno SEZ, with the tight labour market causing difficulties for firms´ recruitment.

Labour mobility became a key area of contention and firm strategizing. A zone regulation was in place which prohibited workers from working at another zone factory for six months if they left employment, enacted in order to prevent poaching of workers.[138] Recruitment was extended to the eastern areas of the province, inhabited by many from ethnic minorities, with a local recruitment agency bringing workers to Savannakhet and housing them in dormitories. The recruitment agency however experienced difficulties. At the point of recruitment, communities distrusted the recruiters due to being previously deceived by migration brokers, the situation hinting at histories of labour not freely chosen. Furthermore, ethnic minority workers reportedly evidenced the highest rates of turnover as many preferred to return to their home villages after being unable to adjust to life in far away factories.[139] One local non-zone factory manager, also affected by the recruitment issues, raised the possibility of recruiting foreign labour.[140] One factory worker reported filling out a resignation form, but managers refused to accept it and persuaded her to stay by saying her position was difficult to replace, indicating coercive elements within efforts to secure a workforce.[141] The main strategy to secure workers however was increasing wages and benefits. Labour scarcity, as well as workers taking

[136] Kabmanivanh Phouxay, "Patterns and Consequences of Undocumented Migration from Lao PDR to Thailand," in *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, ed. Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 350-373.
[137] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2013).
[138] Zone developer interview 13 January 2014.
[139] Recruitment agency manager interviews, 23-24 June 2014.
[140] Interview 18 March 2014.
[141] Interview 18 May 2014.

advantage of this situation to press informal, collective demands on factories for wage raises or improved fringe benefits such as travel stipends, caused managers to respond with increases.[142]

Workers were thus able to gain more of the generated value than might be expected. However, the gains should not be overstated as local factories appeared to also gain from workers´ ongoing embeddedness in subsistence agricultural production. Most workers were the daughters and sons of local farming families, living in their natal households which engaged in rice production and animal rearing. Part of the cost of their social reproduction was offset, meaning that factories escaped paying the full cost of this social reproduction and faced less pressure from workers to increase wages. A focus on the zone´s class relations thus shows that a linear notion of structural transformation does not appear to apply. Capitalist production was combined with, and seemingly to an extent dependent on, non-market oriented forms of production. The very combination however does have the practical effect of orienting more labour to capitalist production, albeit in an indirect way through the socially reproductive farming activities of zone workers´ households.

For the expansion of the zone it appeared that the management of mobility was key. The Lao state attempted to limit mobility by such means as working through village heads to explain the problems of migration and inform villagers of jobs at the local factories.[143] Efforts were thus made to harness mobility and reterritorialize the Lao population. Some expansion of factories has taken place but there are indications that mobilizing enough labour is still a concern and a constraint on further expansion.[144] The Savan-Seno SEZ was apparently enabled to an extent by the combination of the factory wage relation and workers´ subsistence production, and simultaneously constrained by the very unevenness – particularly wage differentials between Thailand and Laos – that investors sought to take advantage of. It thus seems that the

[142] Factory manager interviews 10 January 2014, 27 February 2014, 16 May 2014.
[143] Provincial Department of Labour official interview 9 January 2014.
[144] *Vientiane Times*, "Savannakhet Looking to Fill 3000 Positions," 2 June (2017); *Radio Free Asia Lao*, "Ket Saythikit Peut Hap Kon Ngan (Economic Zone Hiring Workers)," 2 February (2016).

management of mobile class relations will continue to be a key factor in Laos´s regional integration and industrialization.

Conclusion

It is certainly true that Laos has been on the periphery of Southeast Asia over the duration of capitalist development in the past 250 years. Nevertheless as I have shown control over its territory and its population has been a concern of, successively, Siamese kings, French colonialists, and contemporary foreign investors. Indicated here is thus the need to adequately account for the peripheral constitution of Southeast Asia in explanations of regional dynamics. An appreciation of this history also indicates that to understand Laos´s current conjuncture, it behoves us to analyse the economic and geopolitical significance that Laos holds for capital and states in the region and their consequent attempts to create forms of integration which prioritize their own interests. Laos within China´s "Belt and Road" programme would be an especially instructive avenue of analysis here.[145] Moreover, these emerging regional forms can be assessed for the ways that they may operate through differentially integrating populations, and so shed light on adverse incorporation and marginalization in mainland Southeast Asia´s political economy. The beneficiaries of specific forms of regional integration are of course not limited to foreign actors, as they have repeatedly operated through existing local hierarchies of power. It thus appears necessary to specify which Lao actors are most advantaged by the current forms of regional integration, in what ways, and to the disadvantage of whom. Labour incorporation illustrates this point. Ensuring control over labour has been a key element in establishing successive, historical regional formations. Lao labour has over the centuries been incorporated into capitalist orbits in multiple forms and a glance for instance at contemporary tales of labour trafficking and bonded labour, alongside free wage labour, indicates elements of

[145] Tim Summers, "China´s "New Silk Roads": Sub-national Regions and Networks of Global Political Economy," *Third World Quarterly* 37, 9 (2016): 1628-1643.

continuity. Attention must therefore be paid to how the combination of foreign and local Lao actors attempt to control and deploy labour within Laos and also Lao labour beyond its borders. The exact modes of labour incorporation – free, bonded, disguised wage, and so on, as well as their potential combinations in the same sites – can be usefully specified within not only research programmes concerned with labour and migration, but also more broadly in analysis of contemporary development projects and processes. Foregrounding a specification of these modes, along with how workers of differentiated social identities are channelled into them and what labour conditions and remuneration are associated with them, provides a more accurate picture of the capitalist trajectories underway in Southeast Asia and the winners and losers therein. As the case of the Savan-Seno SEZ shows especially, the development of countries in mainland Southeast Asia does not progress in neat steps along a path of lower to higher value-added activities but rather in complex combinations which integrate different forms of production and centres and peripheries in interdependent ways, often threaded together by the movement of workers across the region, to both their advantage and disadvantage.

Mobility thus offers a useful vantage point in analyzing Laos and the region, and as demonstrated one that is deeply imbricated with labour deployment under capitalism. As noted by Molland, Vietnamese and Chinese labour migration to Laos appears to be a seriously understudied phenomenon worthy of analytical redress.[146] The capitalist trajectory of Laos´s regional integration has been constituted – both enabled and disrupted - by the personal trajectories of innumerable workers across Southeast Asian space. They have provided one of the key sets of filaments which have created the "connected histories"[147] of regional and global centres of accumulation and the Lao periphery, and furthermore indicate the need to analyse class relations as an integral part of centre-periphery connections.

[146] Sverre Molland, "Migration and Mobility in Laos", 345.
[147] Gurminder Bhambra, "Historical Sociology, International Relations and Connected Histories," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, 1 (2010): 127-143.

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